

# Take Care of Your Spirit

 [mentalhealthamerica.net/take-care-your-spirit](https://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/take-care-your-spirit)

## HOW SPIRITUALITY HELPS

For lots of people, being spiritual means observing rituals, studying texts and attending religious services, well, religiously. For others, it's not at all about traditional structures or notions of God.

You can think of spirituality as connecting to whatever you consider meaningful and holy. You can find it in God, in yourself, in other people, in nature, art or kindness. Whatever you focus on, spirituality offers many possible benefits, including better mood, less anxiety and depression-and even fewer aches and illnesses.

### Spirituality can provide a:

- reassuring belief in a greater force or being
- sense of purpose and meaning
- focus on your own or universal wisdom
- way to understand suffering
- connection with others
- reminder of the good in the world

### Consider some of the science on religion and spirituality:

- People who meditate have increased activity in a "feel-good" area of the brain
- People with strong religious beliefs recovered faster from heart surgery than people with weaker faith
- People who didn't attend religious services died significantly younger than those who attended more than once a week

Why the connection between spirituality and health? It seems spirituality cuts the stress that so often triggers disease.

## SPIRITUAL PATHS

### Organized Religion

Of course, spirituality isn't like medicine—"just take one dose of prayer daily." But if you are drawn to organized religion, you can get a boost from more active involvement.

- **Join a religious institution.** People who attend a house of worship regularly are happier and healthier, research shows. That's likely because of the [social connection](#) involved. It may also be because religious groups support healthy lifestyle choices, like reduced smoking and drinking.
- **Pray or focus on your notion of God.** You can worship from a prayer book at a specific time each day. Or you can pray from your own heart when you need some solace. Uttering a prayer of [gratitude](#) may be particularly good for your mood.
- **Read religious texts.** Take time to reflect on what they mean to you.
- **Talk with others** who share similar spiritual beliefs and learn from each other.

- **Volunteer** with a religious group or [charity](#).

## Meditation

If more traditional prayers and practices are not for you, you might try meditation. Research shows that meditation offers not only calm but help with anxiety and depression, cancer, chronic pain, asthma, heart disease and high blood pressure.

### Types of Meditation

- **Deep Breathing.** Sit or lie down comfortably. Rest your hands on your stomach. Slowly count to four while inhaling through your nose. Feel your stomach rise. Hold your breath for a second. Slowly count to four while you exhale, preferably through pursed lips to control the breath. Your stomach will fall slowly. Repeat a few times.
- **Mindfulness Meditation.** Focus on your breath. Notice anything that passes through your awareness without judgment. If your mind starts to tackle your to-do list, just return to focusing on your breath.
- **Visualization.** Close your eyes, relax and imagine a peaceful place, like a forest. Engage all your senses: Hear the crunching leaves, smell the damp soil, feel the breeze.
- **Repeating a mantra.** Sit quietly and pick any meaningful or soothing word, phrase or sound. You can repeat the mantra aloud or silently. Experts say the repetition creates a physical relaxation response.

## Connecting with Your Deepest Self

With all the time we spend plugged in, tuned in or online, it's easy to get disconnected from our inner selves. Try to find some time each day to think about who you are and want to be in the world. Figuring out what's really important to you can make daily irritants and stresses feel like less of a burden.

### Try some of these paths to your spiritual side:

- **Focus on your goals, values and beliefs.** What brings you hope, joy and comfort? What do you care about most? How can you make a difference in the world?
- **Keep a journal** to help you express your deepest thoughts and feelings.
- **Read inspiring stories or essays** to unearth insights and philosophies that can enrich your life.
- **Be open to new experiences.** Nurture your spirit with nature, music, art or whatever sounds appealing.
- **Look at what's good in yourself and others.** Notice the sacred in and around you. Sure, there's plenty of bad stuff, but you'll find greater peace and joy by focusing on the [positive](#).

Reviewed by Jeff Levin, PhD, adjunct professor of psychiatry & behavioral sciences at Duke University Medical Center and author of *God, Faith, and Health: Exploring the Spirituality-Healing Connection*.

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